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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Monday, September 17, 2007

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RSC Members Question Federal Effort to Purge Religious Texts from Prison Chapels & Libraries

WASHINGTON, D.C. – In an effort to prohibit the government censorship of religious materials in prison chapels & libraries, members of the [Republican Study Committee](http://www.house.gov/hensarling/rsc) today sent a letter to Harley Lappin, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, asking for additional information and clarification on the federal effort to ban religious texts.

On September 10, 2007, the [New York Times reported](#) that the Bureau of Prisons has authorized that all materials (including books, CDs, tapes), which are not on a list of approved resources, are to be removed from prison libraries. The list of approved materials consists of “up to 150 book titles” and “150 multimedia resources” for each of 20 religions or religious categories.

According to the report, in some instances prison chaplains have been forced to remove libraries that contained thousands of religious texts that had been purchased by the prisons or donated by churches and religious groups.

The text of the letter, written by RSC Chairman Jeb Hensarling (R-TX), Rep. Joe Pitts (R-PA), and Rep. Donald Manzullo (R-IL), is below (and attached to this email):

Dear Director Lappin:

It has recently come to our attention that the Bureau of Prisons has initiated a project called the Standardized Chapel Library Project, designed to limit prisoners’ exposure to certain types of materials, which some feel may facilitate radicalism and violence among inmates.

As you know, it was reported by the *New York Times* on September 10, 2007, that the Bureau has authorized that all materials—books, CDs, tapes—which are not on the Bureau’s list of approved resources be removed from prison libraries. According to a statement made by a Bureau of Prisons’ spokesman, the agency is implementing this program in response to a 2004 report by the Office of the Inspector General in the Department of Justice, recommending that steps be taken to bar access to materials that could “discriminate, disparage, advocate violence or radicalize.” In addition, the article raises concerns regarding the governments’ role in endorsing and restricting specific religious materials by quoting prison chaplains who support a prisoners’ access to religious and spiritual materials without such interference.

While the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Prisons have a vested interest to ensure the safety of inmates and the employees at federal prison facilities, as well as safeguard that the seeds of terror cells are not being sown inside America's prisons, we are concerned with the method and broad implications of the program, as reported. No matter how well intentioned, a government project to limit books and other material deemed religious raises serious issues with respect to the religious liberties of Americans.

As such, we respectfully request that the following information be provided regarding the Bureau of Prisons Library Project, so that we may ascertain the propriety of such measures:

- **Details pertaining to the Standardized Chapel Library Project (i.e.—timetable and method of implementation of the program throughout the U.S. prison system, etc.);**
- **The list of approved materials for prison libraries;**
- **The process used to determine which materials were acceptable and how others were disqualified;**
- **A list of the Bureau experts or other individuals who authored the approved lists and their relevant qualifications;**
- **A list of the nine publishers whose materials are banned from prison libraries; and**
- **Current regulations regarding acceptable outside materials sent through prison mail to inmates (from either a private party or a publisher).**

We must ensure that in America the federal government is not the undue arbiter of what may or may not be read by our citizens.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter, and we look forward to your timely response on this important issue.

Yours respectfully,

**Jeb Hensarling, Member of Congress
Joe Pitts, Member of Congress
Don Manzullo, Member of Congress**

cc: Acting U.S. Deputy U.S. Attorney General Craig Morford

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Congressman Jeb Hensarling is Chairman of the Republican Study Committee (RSC).